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Los Angeles City Government 1781-1981

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Introduction

Los Angeles is the third largest city in the United States and one of the largest cities in the world with a population of 2.9 million people and encompassing a land area of 464 square miles. Two major mountain ranges, the Santa Monica and the Verdugo Mountains, cut across its midsection separating the San Fernando Valley from the rest of the city. The Pacific Ocean borders it on the west and south and the Mojave Desert and mountain ranges on the north. The City of Los Angeles completely surrounds the autonomous cities of Beverly Hills and San Fernando. It partially encircles the cities of Inglewood, Santa Monica and Culver City, as well as county- and state-owned lands. The City covers such a vast territory that many residents do not consider themselves Los Angelenos, but instead identify with one of the more than 70 separate communities which comprise the City. These communities, such as Hollywood and Century City, do not have set boundaries or separate governments. They are a part of the City of Los Angeles.

Most of the people who live in Los Angeles have moved to the City from other parts of the nation or world. These immigrants often assume that Los Angeles city government is the same as the government of the cities from which they have come or are familiar. But, in many respects, Los Angeles has a unique form of government.

In order to discover what makes Los Angeles city government unique, it is important to trace its history and development. This paper discusses the history and nature of the government which serves this extensive, complex and exciting city.

Pueblo Government

Los Angeles is one of the youngest major cities in the world. It was founded as a Spanish settlement by Governor Felipe de Neve. On September 4, 1781, de Neve led an expedition out of nearby San Gabriel and established El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora la Reina de Los Angeles (the City of Our Lady Queen of the Angels), the first official California city. The street and building plan already had been drawn up by de Neve and living sites designated for the 44 hand picked settlers.

The first "Los Angelenos" were from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Of the twenty-two adults, two were Spaniards, one mestizo, two black, eight mulatto and nine native Indians. They were selected on the basis of their availability and special skills, such as blacksmithing, farming. These first settlers were permitted no voice in the governing of the little pueblo.

A "comisionado" was appointed by de Neve from the military to administer local government, military and police affairs. Not until 1788 were the settlers allowed to elect their own governing officers. Alcalde (Mayor) Jose Vanegas, a thirty-three year old Indian and two "regidores" (councilmen) comprised the new "ayuntamiento" (town council). The ayuntamiento was allowed little legislative authority by Spain. It was described by one historian as being concerned mostly with such insignificant issues as serenading and idleness. Membership soon became hereditary and/or available for a price.

Controversial problems and matters of consequence were resolved by direct vote of the adults of the pueblo or by directives from representatives of the Spanish government. With the establishment of Mexican rule in 1822, the ayuntamiento was enlarged to include a "syndico" (treasurer-city attorney) and a secretary. In addition, it was given more authority and the comisionado (city administrator) was stripped of his powers.

It looked like self-rule had come at last. The illusion was short lived. Governor Sola appointed the former comisionado to the position of alcalde. This act merged the civil and military authorities of the city into one office.

By this time, Los Angeles already had gained a colorful reputation. Under Spanish rule it was known as the City whose "chief purpose was to avoid work." In 1830, one-sixth of the 91 adults were listed as "no accounts" and municipal elections were declared void because all the candidates were "vagabonds, drunkards and worse."

The treasury was so small in 1836 (\$1,000) that the City was in a chronic state of debt. When a plague of crows and carrion birds were attracted by the "filthiness of the city," the ayuntamiento members had to take money out of their

own pockets to buy poison because the townspeople would not provide the funds.

Los Angeles citizens were part of the "Californians", a rebel militia which was defeated by General John C. Fremont in January, 1847 at the Cahuenga Ranch in what is now the San Fernando Valley. Fremont's United States forces occupied the City through August of 1848 when the United States acquired California from Mexico for \$15,000,000; approximately what it costs to run the City for four days. Fremont later became the first Governor of the new State of California.

One of Governor Fremont's first acts was to approve an all native-born ayuntamiento. He quickly abandoned his plan and appointed an "anglo" or "gringo" (caucasian) to the ayuntamiento when a dispute arose among the members. Other ayuntamiento members resigned in protest, and the disgusted electorate refused to elect a new ayuntamiento for two years.

By 1855, Anglo-Americans were migrating to Los Angeles by the hundreds and dominated the elective offices of both the City and County of Los Angeles. The City was still an unruly place, noted for its vigilantes, and boasted one bar for every forty residents.

In the next decades, expanding railroads brought businessmen, farmers, merchants and tourists to the City by the thousands. Population boomed from 5,000 people in 1870 to 50,000 in 1890 and 102,000 in 1900. With the population growth and change in population composition, Los Angeles began to settle down and to take self-government seriously.

Progressive Era

California was one of the first states to adopt the concept of "home rule" or "charter" cities. This was very important, for it gave citizens in local communities the power to vote for incorporation (self-government).

California cities originate, or become incorporated through local consent and in accordance with California State law. The law designates two types of cities: general law and charter. All cities must be general law cities before they can become charter cities.

General Law and Charter Cities General law cities are governed by laws enacted by the California State legislature. There are approximately 347 of these cities today. Like charter cities, they have regulatory powers (police powers) and corporate powers (to run and establish their own public works).

Under provisions established by the State of California to distinguish "charter" from "general law" cities, Los Angeles became a charter city in 1925. It is one of approximately 80 charter cities in the State. Unlike general law cities, charter cities can make and enforce all ordinances and regulations of their own municipal affairs in accordance with their own city charters. The legislation which makes this possible is referred to as "state enabling legislation". Where local matters are of statewide concern, the State has the authority to pre-empt or supersede local authority. For example, the State can require Los Angeles and other charter cities to abide by certain State environmental health and safety regulations considered in the general public welfare.

Like other charter cities, Los Angeles is allowed to use any form of governmental organization it wishes. The general law cities must chose a council-manager, council-administrator, or mayor-council form of government as defined by State law.

Charter cities cooperate with one another as independent governments. Los Angeles and its neighbors cooperate on such matters as fire, police protection, street and public utility systems. California cities may contract with counties or other cities for services which they are unable to provide (such as sanitary landfill sites). State law requires each county to provide certain services to the cities within its territory. These required services include property tax assessment and taxation, health services and some judicial services.

Los Angeles City Government Organized under a long and complex "home rule" charter, the City of Los Angeles has developed a unique form of government. Unlike many major cities in the United States whose political structure can be categorized as a "strong mayor" form of government (e.g., Boston, Chicago and New York), Los Angeles has been characterized as having a "weak mayor" form of

government. Actually, its government is founded on a delicate balance between the Mayor, City Council, other elected officials, citizen boards of commissioners and agencies. Much like the United States Constitution, which provided for separate branches of government, the Los Angeles City Charter provides for a division of powers so that neither the executive nor legislative branches can become dominant and so they can check and balance each other's powers.

The "Progressive Era" ("Reform Era") occurred in the early decades of the Twentieth Century when Los Angeles was still a young urban center. It had a profound impact on the nature of California State and Los Angeles City governments. During this era, Los Angeles reformers sought to root out the "inherent vices of bossism, patronage and spoils" which they believed had distorted democracy in other cities.

Initiative, Referendum, Recall One of the most important contributions of the reformers was the delegation of power to the citizens. In 1903, three charter amendments were placed on the ballot. These measures were the recall, initiative and referendum.

The "initiative" permits citizens to put legislation on the municipal ballot for a vote of the people. For example, legislation rejected by the City Council may be placed on the ballot by petition and voted on in a general election. The "referendum" enables submission for a vote of the people certain measures already approved by the City Council and Mayor, but considered objectionable by a significant portion of the electorate. The "recall" allows citizens to remove elected officials from office through a special election. All three of these actions are accomplished through a petitioning procedure set forth by the City Charter.

Nonpartisan Elections Limitations placed by State law on local governments include the provision that County and City elections must be nonpartisan (no political party affiliation to be stated on the ballot). Political party organizations, except "clubs" and specially appointed "state central committees", were prohibited in the State even during Federal and State elections. California State reformers wanted local government to be free from control by political party power cliques which they believed grew out of the

control of party politics by one political faction or another. These early reformers also believed that party identification and control tended to divert attention from the important issues of public policy at the local level.

The reformers imposed nonpartisan requirements on local government to ensure that the Mayor, City Council and other elected officials would be nonpartisan officials who represented the people and not political parties or political bosses. Consequently, party affiliations do not appear on the ballot during the primary or general election. Instead, candidates list their official employment occupational titles.

The Progressive Era's emphasis upon direct democracy and the absence of partisan organization have militated against the growth of "machine" or "boss" politics in Los Angeles and other major California cities. Even State and Federal election campaigns conducted in California tend to be rather free wheeling and unpredictable, marked by an absence of dominant political organizations and individuals.

Professional Government Another safeguard against the development of bossism in Los Angeles City politics is its professional civil service system. With the exception of nonclerical staff of the Mayor's Office and City Council, executives of proprietary departments, the City Administrative Officer, the City Legislative Analyst, the entire staff of the City Attorney's Office and staff of a few federally funded programs, the approximately 38,000 people working in Los Angeles City government, whether secretaries or general managers of the city departments, must qualify for their positions through a civil service examination system. A department general manager (including the Chief of Police) is selected from the top three people who have qualified for the position after extensive examination and meeting of Charter and Civil Service Commission defined professional and experience requirements. The final selection is made by the Mayor and confirmed by the City Council except in the case of proprietary departments. The managerial commissions of the proprietary departments are responsible for hiring and firing the highest ranking executives of their departments.

Establishment of a professional government personnel system at all levels has helped minimize the patronage and spoils which traditionally has been one of the major tools used by politicians to develop and retain their power. It is for this reason that Los Angeles City government is considered one of the most professional city governments in the United States.

Elected Officials

The City Charter provides that the following officers shall be elected by the registered voters of the City of Los Angeles: The Mayor (elected at-large; i.e., by the voters of the entire city), 15 City Councilpersons (elected by geographic councilmanic district), one City Attorney (elected at-large) and one Controller (elected at-large). All serve four-year terms. Elections are nonpartisan (i.e., no political party affiliation), taking place in the off-election year (odd-numbered year) between the United States Presidential election and the California gubernatorial (Governor) election. The even-numbered councilmanic district seats come up for election in one year and the odd-numbered districts two years later.

Elected officials hold full-time positions for which they receive a salary plus the benefits received by all other city employees including pensions, vacation, sick leave and health benefits. In addition, they are provided with the option either to use a City owned car or to receive financial reimbursement for driving their own vehicle while conducting city business. In addition, the Mayor is provided a home and protection by police bodyguards.

Mayor Executive authority over Los Angeles City government is vested in the Mayor. As administrator of the City, the Mayor supervises the work of city departments and employees, presents a proposed annual budget to the City Council, recommends adoption of legislation, appoints city officials including department commissioners (board members) and his own staff, and makes the final selection of most of the department managers. In addition to those Charter responsibilities, the Mayor is the head of the largest city in the region and serves as liaison with approximately sixty-two foreign consulates located in the Los

Angeles area. Only New York City has more consulates. In this liaison capacity, the Mayor is the principal contact between government and the consulate, particularly in the area of commerce and cultural affairs.

Elected by the people of the City as a whole, a mayor serves as the "head of the City". In this capacity, a mayor has an opportunity to exercise considerable leadership. Some mayors have chosen to minimize this role to the extent that Los Angeles government has come to be called a "weak mayor" form of government. Other mayors have exercised an innovative and dynamic position as mayor of "all the people" and liaison with the heads of other cities, counties, states and representatives of foreign nations.

Those choosing to exercise the leadership role have done so in a variety of ways, including: mediating between political factions for purposes of accomplishing legislative action; appointing special committees of public and private citizens to investigate and eliminate corruption, develop economic proposals and actions, and investigate urban problems; serving as roving ambassadors to foreign nations and other cities in order to entice trade and business to Los Angeles; working directly with business to guide City growth and development; initiating cooperative ventures between neighboring cities and other governmental jurisdictions; and representing mutual interests at the state and national levels in order to secure legislation and funding beneficial to the City and the entire region.

A mayor is the most effective when able to develop a cooperative relationship with the City Council. The mayors who have not enjoyed a good relationship with the Council have found themselves in a position where the Council has disapproved mayoral appointments, budget requests (including funding for staff in the Mayor's Office) and legislative recommendations. Such mayors have had to resort with regularity to the veto as a means of exercising their political leverage.

The veto can be overridden by a two-thirds majority vote of the Council (10 votes). A good relationship with the Council depends largely upon the Mayor's ability to develop supporters on the Council who will go along with the Mayor's point of view or who will not oppose the Mayor. A shift in

Council support and failure of a mayor to adapt to this shift can change a strong mayor into a weak mayor very quickly. This sometimes happens when new Councilpersons are elected.

City Council Legislative authority is vested in the 15 Council members. Councilpersons are elected from the geographic council districts in which they live. The boundaries of these districts are established by the Council and conform to Federal and State requirements for general representation. Each council district contains approximately 190,000 people; larger than most cities in the United States. Councilpersons spend a great deal of time in their districts and have branch offices in their districts to facilitate handling of services to their constituents. In a city as large and diverse as Los Angeles, the Councilpersons are perhaps the most important link between city government and the citizenry.

The City Charter specifies that the Council is to meet at least five days a week. This provision makes Los Angeles and Detroit the only full-time city councils in the United States. Councils of other city governments are part-time, sometimes meeting only once or twice a month for a two or three hour evening meeting. In recent years, there have been efforts to change the charter to permit the full council to meet less often. Thus far the electorate has not voted for such a change.

The Los Angeles City Council is a legislative body. It is estimated that each Councilperson votes on over 30,000 separate items each year. The Council is responsible for initiating and adopting City ordinances, adopting the City budget proposed by the Mayor, approving Mayoral appointments, determining the functions of the various City departments, approving grant requests and funding allocations, monitoring grant funded activities, and adopting the City's General Plan and its implementing ordinances and programs.

A principle function of a Councilperson is as a representative of the councilmanic district. In this capacity the Councilperson handles constituent complaints, acts in the constituent's behalf and serves as a liaison between the constituent and other governmental entities and officials. The

Councilpersons in effect are "mayors" of their districts. Other Councilpersons and City officials are very careful about becoming involved in anything relating to another Councilperson's district without first discussing the matter with that Councilperson. The Councilpersons maintain ongoing contact with the County Supervisors, State and federal legislators who represent their districts at other levels of government. These officials often work together to meet the needs of their constituents and to support legislation beneficial to the district.

Each Councilperson serves as chairperson of one of the fifteen standing committees of the Council and as a member of two other committees. It is within the committees that legislation and other proposals are researched so that recommendations can be made to the full Council. Like the full Council, the committees conduct public hearings as part of their efforts to secure information concerning the subject matter pending before them. Their meetings may be held anywhere in the City. This is in contrast to full Council meetings which, by Charter, must take place in the downtown City Hall.

The President of the Council makes the committee and committee chairperson assignments. These appointments include other intergovernmental committees and offices such as county intergovernmental commissions, the South Coast Regional Coastal Commission, and appointments to other special committees and boards. When the Mayor is out of the City, the Council President is Acting Mayor.

City Attorney The City Attorney is the legal advisor or lawyer to the City. The City Attorney's Office, including clerical staff, is outside the civil service system. Staff are appointed or dismissed by the City Attorney. Upon request of any City official, the City Attorney prepares legal opinions, prepares and approves as to form City contracts and ordinances, prosecutes and defends actions and claims for or against the City and performs other legal services. At the request of the City Council, the City Attorney prepares City legislation. All misdemeanor crimes arising from violations of the City Charter, City ordinances or applicable State laws are prosecuted by the City Attorney's Office.

Controller The Controller acts as the chief accounting officer of the City and audits all receipts and disbursements of the City including those for the proprietary departments. It is the Controller's signature which appears on all City checks. The Controller's staff, except for a few top aides, are covered under the civil service system.

Non-Elected Officials

With the exception of the Legislative Analyst, each of the following non-elected officials is appointed by the Mayor, subject to the confirmation of the City Council in accordance with civil service provisions. Budgets of each are controlled by the Mayor and City Council.

City Administrative Officer The City Administrative Officer (CAO) is exempt from civil service hiring and termination procedures. The CAO is appointed by and serves in a staff capacity to the Mayor and Council, keeping them advised as to the condition, finances and future needs of the City and conducting special studies for them. The CAO assists the Mayor in preparation of the annual budget, researches and recommends improved City management and conducts regular audits of the management effectiveness of each City department. The CAO's responsibilities do not apply to the proprietary departments except by special request of the City Council and/or Mayor.

City Clerk The City Clerk is responsible for the custody and preservation of the city seal, ordinances, contracts, records, archives and other documents. It is the City Clerk's responsibility to keep records of City Council proceedings, to administer oaths to elected and appointed officials, to summon witnesses to hearings upon request by City officials, to oversee the municipal elections, to maintain a complete record of the City's real estate holdings and to act as the City tax collector (ex-officio).

Chief Legislative Analyst The Chief Legislative Analyst (CLA) is exempt from civil service hiring and termination procedures. The CLA is appointed by and serves as staff to the City Council, analyzing Federal and State legislation and lobbying Federal and State officials in order to secure legislation beneficial to the City. The CLA's staff includes

full-time lobbyists in the Federal capitol in Washington, D.C. and the State capitol in Sacramento. In addition, the Legislative Analyst provides staff support and carries out research and special tasks for the Council and its committees including monitoring grants for the City Council Grants Committee.

Purchasing Agent Makes purchases of City materials and equipment upon request by City officials.

Treasurer Is the custodian of all money deposited in the City treasury. The Treasurer is the accountant in terms of receipts and maintenance of City funds and is custodian of all securities bought by the City and of all unsold City bonds.

Department Heads (except proprietary departments) There are more than thirty separate departments* in the City of Los Angeles. Some of these are managed by department managers, others by managerial commissions. All are accountable to the Mayor, who by Charter, has the "right at all times" to have department heads "in sympathy with his policies of administration." However, the Council as well as the Mayor may define the duties of a department.
*For the purposes of simplification, the term "department" refers to all types of City agencies.

City Commissioners An interesting feature of Los Angeles City government is its commission system. The commissions are made up of lay people, appointed by the Mayor with the consent of the City Council. The commission system was instituted to insure a citizen voice at the department level. Most commissions have five citizen members appointed to serve five-year staggered terms. Most commissioners (sometimes called "board" members) serve in a part-time capacity receiving only ten- to twenty-five dollars for each commission meeting they attend (usually not to exceed four meetings a month), plus mileage and a meal (if meetings are reconvened after a meal break). The cost of the meal cannot include any alcoholic beverage. It is the task of most of the commissions to advise and, to some extent, direct the heads of departments especially in policy matters. Some commissions act as heads of the department over which they serve.

Departments-Bureaus-Agencies

There are five kinds of departments within the City: Council controlled, proprietary, semi-proprietary, commission managed with Council-Mayor budget control, and federally funded.

Council Controlled - Commission The Council controls the budget and the department is managed by a general manager who is appointed by and responsible to the Mayor. The commissions act primarily in advisory capacity to the general manager.

City departments in this category: Animal Regulation, Building and Safety, City Planning, Cultural Affairs and Employee Relations.

Council Controlled - No Commission In 1960, virtually no Federal monies were received by the City. Between 1973 and 1980, Federal funds increased from approximately \$81 million to approximately \$900 million. In 1976 the City instituted governmental reorganization measures in an effort to address the increased complexity of city government and this dramatic increase in its Federal funding. Some new departments were created, others reorganized along functional lines. As a part of this reorganization, the board of the Data Services Bureau was eliminated and the Departments of Community Development and General Services were created without commission functions.

The Data Services Bureau and Department of General Services are accountable to the Mayor and provide services to other City agencies; e.g., computerized data support, custodial, employee parking, report printing, and other services. Since the departments do not develop policies directly impacting the general public, their budgets are open to public review and comment during the City Council budget hearings, they are audited by other City officials, and their functions are internal to the administrative operation of the government, it was determined that it was inappropriate to include a commission review function over those agencies.

The Community Development Department is funded by and administers the City's Federal grants including Federal Revenue Sharing Funds and other Federal human services and development grants. Many of the grants specify that citizen boards or committees are to be directly involved in the administration of the particular grant. The Mayor is designated by the Federal government as the individual responsible for the administration of the Revenue Sharing Funds.

The City Council Grants Committee oversees all grants to make certain that the grant provisions are carried out properly. In addition, both the State and Federal governments monitor and audit grants and the City Administrative Officer monitors grants. In light of all of these checks on the Department's functions, it was determined that the addition of a commission to oversee the Department's operations was unnecessary.

Proprietary The commission is the manager of a proprietary or "independent" department. In this capacity, the commission is responsible for hiring and firing personnel (including the department administrator), for budget approval and for determining departmental programs. Fees for services rendered provide financial support for department operations. The Mayor and City Council have no control over the budgets of these departments. Consequently, it is possible for a proprietary department to negotiate with the governmental entities (including foreign governments) for purchase or sale of properties, goods or services without the express consent of the City Council or Mayor.

Departments in this category: Airports, City Employee Retirement System, Fire and Police Pensions, Harbor, and Water and Power. The Departments of Airport, Water and Power, Police, Fire and Pensions each have annual revenues of over 100 million dollars and control budgets larger than those of most cities and towns in the United States.

Semi-Proprietary These Commission-managed departments are funded from revenues controlled by their commissions. Since these funds are insufficient to meet the operational expenses of the departments, supplemental

funds are provided through the City's "general fund", which is controlled by the Mayor and City Council. Departments in this category: Library and Recreation and Parks.

Commission Managed The commission functions as manager of these departments. The Mayor and Council control the department's budget.

Departments in this category: Personnel, Police, and Public Works (whose full-time salaried board manages six separate bureaus, including the bureaus of Engineering, Street Maintenance and Sanitation).

Federally Funded The City Housing Authority and Community Redevelopment Agency are funded by allocations provided primarily by the Federal government. They are managed by citizen boards appointed by the Mayor (with Council consent) in accordance with Federal and State statutes.

Conclusion

Los Angeles City government is composed of many interdependent offices. This creates a governmental balance in which powers are shared and yet individual independence is retained.

Unlike "strong mayor" or "strong council" cities where patronage dictates or strongly influences departmental operations, Los Angeles has evolved a system in which City departments are highly professional and are accountable to commissions, fifteen City Councilpersons and a Mayor. From its inception in 1850, checks and balances of powers, reflected by who controls department budgets and appointments, has resulted in a dynamic atmosphere virtually devoid of "bossism" and partisan politics once common in cities throughout the United States.

The nature of Los Angeles City government is in many respects unique. It is a modern system which grew out of the reforms of the Progressive Era and the traditions established by the Spanish government in 1781. The unusual

non-partisan City government with its delicate balance between Mayor, Council, commissions and departments is a system of government which represents the ideals not only of Los Angeles' forefathers, but American society itself. It is a representative government virtually lacking in partisanship, bossism and spoils. By retaining the populist mechanisms of initiative, referendum and recall, the city has given the voter considerable power to make government responsive to the people.

Additional Recommended Reading

Bowron, Fletcher and Doyce B. Nunis, Jr. **Los Angeles and Its Environs in the Twentieth Century: A Bibliography of a Metropolis**, Ward Ritchie Press, Los Angeles, 1973. For the person interested in further research into Los Angeles this comprehensive bibliography of papers, articles and books is the place to begin. This tremendous work was initiated by one of the most revered figures in the history of Los Angeles City government, former Mayor and later Judge Fletcher Bowron.

"**Charter of General Law City**", League of California Cities, Sacramento, March 1971. Other pamphlets on California city government are available for a fee from the League of California Cities, 900 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 702, Los Angeles, California 90017.

City Charter, Los Angeles. Available from **The Los Angeles Daily Journal**, Circulation Department, 220 West First Street, Los Angeles, California 90012 (for \$20 or more).

Finney, Guy W. **Angel City in Turmoil**. Los Angeles: American Press, 1945.

Williard, Charles Dwight. **The Herald's History of Los Angeles City**. Los Angeles: Kingles-Barnes and Neuner Company, 1901. A unique history of early Los Angeles.

"**Los Angeles: Structure of a City**", League of Women Voters, Los Angeles, 1976. A detailed discussion of Los Angeles government, financing, functions and processes. Available for a fee from the League of Women Voters, 3660 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90010.

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